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2010

Review of *Modern American Indian Leaders: Their Lives and Their Works* 2 vols. By Dean Chavers

Deborah Welch
Longwood University

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Welch, Deborah, "Review of *Modern American Indian Leaders: Their Lives and Their Works* 2 vols. By Dean Chavers" (2010). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 2551.

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Modern American Indian Leaders: Their Lives and Their Works. 2 vols. By Dean Chavers. Foreword by Terry Johnson. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007. xvii + 720 pp. Illustrations, appendices, bibliography, index. \$159.95.

This two-volume set contains eighty-seven biographical sketches of notable Indian men and women drawn almost exclusively from the

last half of the twentieth century. The author (Dean Chavers is director of Catching the Dream, an American Indian scholarship program) categorizes his subjects into eight leadership sections—Tribal, War, Sports, Literary, Education, Movement, Religious, and Other. Each division includes familiar names: Phillip Martin and Wilma Mankiller (tribal leaders), Ira Hayes (war), Jim Thorpe (sports), N. Scott Momaday (literary), Beatrice Medicine (education), Dennis Banks (movement), and Leon Shenandoah (religious), among others. Roughly half of the biographies focus on lesser-known leaders, many of whose lives touched that of the author, people whom he eulogizes in these pages.

Ostensibly written to provide “heroes” to a new generation of Indian young people, this book, nonetheless, often seems dated in its approach. Its opening chapter outlining “The Major Issues” faced by Indian communities quickly descends into a polemic castigating the “despotism” of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and its “goons,” while failing to address issues of immediate concern to Indian young people (enrollment of children, for example). Chavers’s review of nineteenth- and twentieth-century history contains unfortunate errors in content and chronology while regrettably oversimplifying the roles played by Indian peoples. Chavers admires John Collier’s Indian Reorganization Act, brought low, he argues, by right-wing assimilationists, failing to acknowledge the opposition of many Indian leaders, particularly among the Great Plains nations.

Readers will find notable gaps, especially among Lakota people Chavers has opted not to include here. Rather, he elects to cast a spotlight on three of his fellow Lumbee from eastern North Carolina’s Robeson County, perhaps seeking to redress the refusal of the federal government as well as many Indian nations to recognize the Lumbees.

Overall, this book could have been vastly improved by judicious editing to correct errors, eliminate annoying repetition of information, and reduce the author’s reliance on passive voice. Pedestrian prose weakens this work’s

appeal, as does the author’s indulgence in using these pages to air his views on a variety of issues. Readers may be surprised to learn that Justice Stevens is “the only true liberal left on the [Supreme] Court.” In making his arguments, Chavers often employs an anecdotal approach, offering almost no citations to support his statistics or interpretation of events, which can differ from those found in other, more carefully documented, studies.

These volumes frequently take on the cast of a memoir, marked by the use of first-person narrative. The entry about Richard Oakes and the Alcatraz Occupation of 1969-1971 contains a good deal of information about Chavers’s activities in San Francisco during those years. The best of *Modern American Indian Leaders* lies in the all-too-brief passages in which Chavers allows his subjects (or their relatives) to speak. Their memories offer sometimes poignant insights into American Indian lives in the latter half of the twentieth century. Forty black-and-white photographs of the subjects covered in these pages can be found at the end of the second volume, along with an appendix containing Richard Nixon’s famous 1970 Recommendations for Indian Policy as well as a list of terminated tribes. These volumes bring to light the contributions of selected Indian leaders, many of whose stories are not well known outside of their communities.

DEBORAH WELCH
Department of History
Longwood University
Farmville, Virginia